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## **Underemployment and Workforce Development in the Mississippi Delta: Community-Based Action Research for Program Planning to Increase Livelihood Security\***

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**ABSTRACT** Underemployment and poverty are important social problems, and they have received attention from researchers and policymakers with interest directed toward workforce development programs. Building from the knowledge obtained through regional and national quantitative studies, this project assessed what employers and underemployed adults living in Mississippi Delta communities had to say about these problems and how to address them for the purpose of informing a community-based organization. Following a review of Census data, qualitative telephone interviews and focus groups were utilized in this community-based action research effort aimed at informing workforce development program planning to increase livelihood security. Results from asset mapping and needs assessment processes indicate that employers and the underemployed share similarities in how they view the area's socioeconomic condition, but there are

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differences between the groups in interpreting the position of the underemployed in relation to wanting to work. Follow-up meetings were used to check, expand and interpret these research results, and additional planning meetings were held. Program and policy implications are discussed.

The southern United States faces underemployment and poverty, thus limiting the life chances of the region's individuals and families and negatively impacting community sustainability. Much attention has been directed toward this issue, especially through quantitative analysis which has expanded our knowledge of underemployment trends and correlates. There is a need, however, for investigation of how the people actually living in the region interpret their situation and what they feel should be done in pursuit of workforce and community development. This gap constrains the efficacy of program interventions aimed at decreasing underemployment.

As a step in bridging this gap, the Tri-County Workforce Alliance – a nonprofit organization located in the Mississippi Delta – and its member community-based partners collaborated with researchers to develop and implement a program to systematically address these timely issues. This project examines underemployment in two Mississippi Delta counties, addressing what employers and people identified as “underemployed” have to say about the issue and possible interventions. Utilizing the community-based action research framework with a combination of asset mapping and needs assessment, multiple research methods were employed, including analysis of Census data, employer interviews and focus groups with underemployed adults. Findings from this study were used as the basis for empirically informed program planning. This article provides an introduction to the project and methods and an overview of the prominent research findings. This is followed with a discussion of program and policy implications.

## **Livelihood and Underemployment**

“Livelihood” refers to the manner in which individuals, households and their communities struggle for survival and attempt to achieve a

particular standard of living. Livelihood strategies involve continuous processes of negotiation and redefinition of social, economic and political relations within communities and broader social institutions in an effort to mesh material and experiential needs in pursuit of some level of security and standard of living (Bebbington 1999; De Haan 2000; Ellis 1998). Although there are numerous components to livelihood security beyond the economic realm of the labor market, employment plays a pivotal role in modern times.

The complexity of livelihood security strategies necessitates a nuanced understanding of employment status. Rather than simply refer to the uni-dimensional situation “unemployment,” it is often more appropriate to address “underemployment,” meaning a relative state of nonoptimal employment, including such familiar situations as lay-off and working multiple low-wage jobs in addition to basic unemployment. Encompassing more than merely an academic concept, Stofferahn (2000) finds this approach to more adequately fit the lived experiences of those people it references.

There are four general “states” of underemployment discussed in the literature. These include (Jensen et al. 1999; Lichter, Landry and Clogg 1991):

- *Sub-Unemployed*: Those adults who are not working and are not actively looking for work, but who would like to work if they found a job. They are often referred to as “discouraged workers.”
- *Unemployed*: Adults who are not working but are actively looking for work. Includes those on lay-off.
- *Involuntary Part-time Workers*: Adults working less than full-time (i.e. thirty-five hours per week), because they are not able to find full-time positions.
- *Low-Income Workers*: Working adults whose labor market earnings are less than 125 percent of the poverty threshold. They are often labeled as the “working poor.”

Considering these forms of underemployment, research findings suggest that nonmetropolitan (including rural) workers are more likely than their urban counterparts to be underemployed (Jensen et al. 1999). Furthermore, Slack and Jensen (2002) summarize the literature as showing that nonmetropolitan racial and ethnic minorities in the South are particularly susceptible to underemployment

and poverty (Jensen et al. 1999; Jensen, Findeis and Wang 2000). Also vulnerable are non-college bound youth in southern states across the rural to urban divide (Beaulieu and Barfield 2000). These challenges are compounded by regional and global pressures as multi-national firms leave the south in search of lower-cost labor and tax rates and fewer regulations (Glasmeier and Leichenko 1999), ironically undercutting the traditional approach to economic development in the region.

Taking the pursuit of livelihood security as the starting point, recognizing the complexity of employment goals and considering research demonstrating the hardships faced by those people in rural areas, it is advisable to focus increased attention on combating underemployment, specifically in persistently poor regions such as the Mississippi Delta. This is particularly important for areas with racial and ethnic diversity, because such a population may require multiple responses to underemployment and other hardships (Saenz and Thomas 1991; Slack and Jensen 2002). One approach to meeting this complex and dynamic challenge is through community-based action research, a framework that assists in amplifying people's "hidden voices" by linking research, practice and policy (Harris 2001).

## **Methods**

### **Community-Based Action Research for Asset Mapping and Needs Assessment**

Community-based action research (CBAR) is a framework for pursuit of grassroots empowerment. It brings together those research approaches described as "participatory" and "action" oriented in nature (Chambers, Pacey and Thrupp 1989; Reason and Bradbury 2001; Selener 1997; Stringer 1999; Voth 1979). These approaches share several common principles, including collaboration through meaningful participation, acquisition of knowledge and pursuit of social change (Reason and Bradbury 2001). The primary goal of such research is to generate knowledge and thereby redistribute power (Selener 1997).

According to Stringer's (1999) interpretation and synthesis of the framework, community-based action research consists of three primary components in a cyclical and dialectic relationship: 1) look,

2) think and 3) act. At the looking stage, research participants are invited to witness the world around them by gathering data, defining issues of importance and describing them in an effort to construct “pictures” of the community. The thinking stage calls for exploration, analysis and interpretation of these pictures for the purpose of explaining the state of the world and developing theories to effectively inform action – the third stage. This action may entail reporting research findings as well as planning, implementing and evaluating programs of social change. Over the course of any particular attempt to address a social issue, it is assumed that this cycle will be repeated over and again, each time spiraling to a heightened level of collective consciousness and efficacy.

Action programs may be developed for pursuit of numerous objectives, ranging from self-development efforts to impacting intervention programs and even policies. The participants in the present project sought to amplify the voices of people living in the Mississippi Delta as they considered issues of underemployment. This endeavor included attention to inter-subjectively defined “ideal jobs,” assets available in pursuit of such employment, barriers and challenges in the way of meeting goals, and ideas for possible action to be taken. In other words, asset mapping and needs assessment were brought together on a common set of issues.

Asset mapping refers to identification and analysis of available and accessible resources at the individual, family, organizational and community levels. It is used to address the ways in which people may empower themselves for pursuit of common goals. This approach allows people to start from where they are and to identify ways of instigating change (Beaulieu 2002; Kretzmann and McKnight 1993). On the other hand, needs assessment addresses whether a “problem” exists, its extent or variety, and an estimate of warranted services. Needs assessment helps people to identify and prioritize what should be given attention within their community. This approach is useful for providing an inventory of what is needed to improve community life. Although often discussed in terms of one versus the other, these two approaches to preparation for community action are mutually supportive.

**Table 1. Characteristics of Employers Interviewed in Coahoma and Quitman Counties, Mississippi.**

Types of Businesses Represented in Employer Interviews	
Manufacturing	
Construction	
Automotive and machinery repair	
Retail (including agricultural inputs and products)	
News publishing and distribution	
Social services	
Financial services	
Medical services	
Education and training	
Municipal and regional utilities	
Number of employers interviewed	38
Total number of job positions represented by the employers interviewed	2,543
Number of full time job positions represented by the employers interviewed	2,174
Average number of all job positions (minimum – maximum)	67 (1 – 540)
Average number of full time job positions (minimum – maximum)	59 (1 – 540)
Average hourly wage for entry level positions (minimum – maximum)	\$8.17 (\$5.15 – \$14.42)
Employers providing some form of employee benefits	82%
Employers willing to provide time off and/or other assistance for employees to obtain education and training	65%
Employers likely to hire additional employees in the future	68%

## Data Collection and Analysis

Project partners used multiple methods of data collection and analysis in this study. To begin, county and state level data from the 1990 Census and 2000 Census were analyzed (U.S. Census Bureau 2000). Attention was given to creating a social, economic and demographic portrait of two Delta counties – Coahoma and Quitman – and comparing this information to the state of Mississippi as a whole. Specific variables of interest included: population and population change, percent of population in racial groups, age distribution, highest level of educational attainment, number of employed adults, unemployment rate, household income and poverty.

Employers in the two target counties were then interviewed via telephone as a way to tap their views on economic issues facing the region, especially in regard to underemployment and the role of education and training. They were primarily asked open-ended qualitative questions as a way of generating in-depth information. A purposive sample of employers was contacted by the lead community-based organization. They were selected on the basis of producing goods or providing services and offering employment opportunities beyond the business owners' families. Furthermore, convenience stores/gas stations were excluded. These contacts were informed about the purpose of the interview and asked if they would participate. From the initial contacts, 48 employer representatives agreed to participate (32 from Coahoma County and 16 from Quitman County). An attempt was then made to contact each employer representative a minimum of three times. On this basis, 38 interviews were completed, representing 79.2 percent of the total final sample (see Table 1 for a description of the businesses represented).

Focus groups were next utilized as a method to assess the views of underemployed adults in the target counties (Coahoma and Quitman) and two additional counties in the vicinity (Bolivar and Tallahatchie). These comparison groups were chosen on the basis of their socioeconomic similarity with the target counties, the tendency of residents to work in these places, and because the lead community-based organization may expand services to them.

The use of focus groups was justified on the basis that they provide insight on clearly defined topics through discussion among participants (Morgan and Krueger 1998) and are often effective in facilitating meaningful participation in the research process and



**Table 2. Characteristics of Focus Group Participants from Bolivar, Coahoma, Quitman and Tallahatchie Counties, Mississippi.**

	Number	Percent
<b>Total number of participants</b>	29	100.0
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	9	31.0
Female	20	69.0
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>		
Black/African American	28	96.6
White	1	3.4
<b>Highest level of education completed</b>		
Less than high school	1	3.4
High school degree (or GED)	12	41.4
Vocational tech. certificate	3	10.3
Some college, no degree	10	34.5
Two year college degree or higher	3	10.3
<b>Marital status</b>		
Single, never married	11	37.9
Married	7	24.2
Separated, widowed or divorced	11	37.9
<b>Children below the age of 18 living in household</b>		
Average number	1	
(minimum – maximum)	(0 – 4)	
<b>Current employment status</b>		
Unemployed, not looking for work	2	6.9
Unemployed, actively seeking work	6	20.7
Employed in part-time job	5	17.2
Employed in full-time job	12	41.4
Temporarily employed	3	10.3
Retired	1	3.4
<b>Total household income in 2001</b>		
Less than \$10,000	10	34.5
\$10,000 – \$14,999	9	31.0
\$15,000 – \$19,999	3	10.3
\$20,000 – \$24,999	3	10.3
\$25,000 – \$29,999	3	10.3
\$30,000 or above	1	3.4

tapping the views of minority and other often neglected populations (Baker and Hinton 1999). Thus, focus groups provide rich data and an avenue for public participation in research and planning endeavors (Davies 1999; Waterton and Wynne 1999). There are numerous instances where focus group methods have been used successfully in the realms of social problem identification (Davies 1999), community environmental preferences (Waterton and Wynne 1999) and assessment of policy and program effectiveness (Green and Picciano 2002; Rikoon et al. 2002). Similar to issues addressed in the employer interviews, topics discussed in the focus groups included underemployment and poverty as well as ideal jobs, the features of such jobs that make them appealing and ideas for future action.

A list of potential participants was constructed and contacted by the community-based organizations involved in the effort that provided health, social or educational services to the underemployed. Guidelines for being invited to participate in the focus groups included the person identifying as either unemployed or not working in a favorable position (e.g. part-time, multiple part-time, low wage). An attempt was also made to represent different age ranges. There were 29 total participants (see Table 2 for a socioeconomic description of participants).

Following completion of employer interviews and underemployed focus groups, a total of six follow-up meetings were held in the two target counties. Initial meetings consisted of the research team presenting results followed with group discussion of the validity of these findings. Beginning in December 2002, two meetings were held with employers in Coahoma and Quitman Counties consisting of 30 participants. In January 2003, two similar meetings were held with underemployed community residents and educators. There were 43 total participants in these meetings. Two additional planning meetings were held as a way to move forward from the research findings to the design of a model program for workforce development. These meetings consisted of group discussions in response to specific questions on the topic of workforce development curriculum and delivery. The 14 participants included the underemployed, employers, educators and other stakeholders. These meetings led to the development of a working group that

Table 3. Characteristics of Coahoma County, Quitman County and the State of Mississippi.

	Coahoma County			Quitman County			Mississippi		
	White	Black	Total*	White	Black	Total*	White	Black	Total*
Population	9,048	21,269	30,622	3,085	6,943	10,117	1,745,353	1,033,437	2,844,658
Percent Racial Groups	29.54%	69.46%		30.49%	68.63%		61.36%	36.33%	
	Other	0.01%		Other	0.01%		Other	2.32%	
Age									
	Younger than 18								
	18-34			33.0%			31.9%		
				21.8%			22.2%		
	35-54			25.4%			24.0%		
	55-64			7.5%			8.6%		
	65 and Older			12.3%			13.3%		
Educational Attainment for Adults 25 Years and Older									
	Less than High School			37.8%			44.9%		
	High School Degree			21.5%			25.0%		
	Some College, No Degree			18.5%			14.6%		
	Associate Degree			6.0%			4.9%		
Bachelor Degree or Higher				16.2%			10.6%		

**Table 3. Characteristics of Coahoma County, Quitman County and the State of Mississippi, contd.**

	Coahoma County			Quitman County			Mississippi		
	White	Black	Total*	White	Black	Total*	White	Black	Total*
Employed Civilians 16 and Over			10,117			3,487			1,173,314
Unemployment Rate	4.1%	14.1%	10.1%	3.0%	11.3%	8.4%	4.6%	13.3%	7.4%
Mean Household Income-1999	\$51,007	\$27,469	\$36,008	\$38,372	\$25,439	\$30,357	\$48,457	\$29,748	\$42,315
Median Household Income-1999	\$39,270	\$16,374	\$22,338	\$29,938	\$16,970	\$20,636	\$37,420	\$20,572	\$31,330
Persons Below Poverty Line	1,040	9,509	10,700	519	2,746	3,298	187,778	345,428	548,079
Percent of Racial Group Population Below Poverty Line	11.7%	46.1%	35.9%	17.1%	40.3%	33.1%	11.1%	34.9%	19.9%
Families Below Poverty Line	210	2,000	2,235	107	609	719	39,373	77,915	120,039
Percent of Racial Group Families Below Poverty Line	8.1%	41.3%	29.8%	12.1%	37.9%	28.6%	8.0%	31.6%	16.0%

Source: 2000 Census of Population and Housing - Summary File 3, table compiled by authors.

\* "Total" is more than the sum of White and Black categories. Other racial groups include American Indian, Asian American, Hawaiian/Pacific Islander and those who reported two or more races.

constructed, implemented and evaluated a pilot-program for better coordination of workforce development services and professional training (see Jones 2003; Ross 2003; Taylor 2004).

## **Research Results**

### **Census Analysis**

Figures from the United States Census are presented in Table 3. Coahoma County's population consisted of 30,622 people in the year 2000. This was a 3.3 percent decrease from 1990. Approximately 29.5 percent of the 2000 population were classified as white, while 69.5 percent were classified as black. Quitman County showed 10,117 residents in 2000, also down from 1990 (a decrease of 3.6 percent). Similar to Coahoma County, Quitman County's racial mix consisted of nearly 30.5 percent white and 68.6 percent Black. These racial group patterns were nearly opposite of those found for the state as a whole; Mississippi's population was 61.4 percent white and 36.3 percent black, while 2.3 percent of the people were classified as "other," including American Indian, Hawaiian/Pacific Islander and those who reported two or more races. The target counties also showed a small percent of people who officially reported themselves as being "Hispanic" or "Latino."

Concerning age group distribution, 33.0 percent of the people in Coahoma County were younger than 18 years of age, and 31.9 percent were in the same category in Quitman County. Approximately one-quarter of the population in each county were between the ages of 35 and 54, followed in frequency by those in the 18-34 year old category. In Coahoma County, 7.5 percent of the population was 55-64 years old, and 12.3 percent of the population was age 65 and older. A similar pattern was found in Quitman County, with 8.6 and 13.3 percent, respectively. These age distributions were similar to those found in the state as a whole.

Data on the educational attainment of adults 25 years of age and older show that 37.8 percent of Coahoma County residents and 44.9 percent of those in Quitman County had less than a high school degree or equivalent. These figures were much higher than the finding from the state (27.1 percent). The percent of the population in other educational categories was much closer to state levels. For instance, 21.5 percent of the people in Coahoma County and one-

quarter of those in Quitman County reported their educational attainment at the level of a high school degree. Combining those people with some college but no degree with those having an associates degree and those with a bachelors degree or higher, 40.7 percent of the 25 year and older population had some college experience in Coahoma County and 30.1 percent had similar attainment in Quitman County. It should be noted, however, that the bachelor degrees and higher category accounted for only 16.2 percent and 10.6 percent.

There was a 10.1 percent unemployment rate in Coahoma County and an 8.4 percent unemployment rate in Quitman County in 2000.<sup>1</sup> Breaking these figures down for rates within specific racial groups demonstrates some alarming differences. While there was a 4.1 percent unemployment rate for whites in Coahoma County, blacks fared worse at 14.1 percent. Somewhat similar findings were seen in Quitman County, although the unemployment rates were lower for both whites (3.0 percent) and blacks (11.3 percent). Comparing these county-level results with the state totals, there was lower overall unemployment statewide (7.4 percent), but the disparities along racial lines were still evident. Mississippi whites had an unemployment rate of 4.6 percent while Mississippi blacks had an unemployment rate of 13.3 percent.

Investigation of mean and median 1999 household income levels demonstrates that Coahoma (\$36,008 and \$22,338) and Quitman County (\$30,357 and \$20,636) households were less financially secure compared to the state as a whole (\$42,315 and \$31,330), and there were again disparities between racial groups. The mean and median household incomes for whites were \$51,007 and \$39,270 in Coahoma County, while the same figures for black households were \$27,469 and \$16,374. Quitman County household income data were similar. The mean income for whites was \$38,372, and the median was \$29,938. For blacks, the figures were \$25,439 and \$16,970.

Nearly 36.0 percent of the total population in Coahoma County fell below the poverty line in 1999. Interestingly, 11.7 percent of whites were in this predicament, as were 46.1 percent of blacks.

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<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, adequate and comparable statistics for other "underemployed" categories were not available at the county-level for this analysis.

**Table 4. Summary Results from Employers Interviewed in Coahoma and Quitman Counties, Mississippi.**

<i>Community and Regional Assets</i>
Tourism
Farm-related industry
Future industrial development opportunities
Improved physical infrastructure
Enterprise Zone
Delta Regional Authority
Increased educational stability
Existing workforce training programs
<i>Barriers and Challenges</i>
Few jobs
Inability to attract new businesses
Unemployable workforce/low educational levels
Crime and drug problems
<i>Action Ideas</i>
Develop more industry and jobs
Basic skills education (reading, writing, math)
Vocational and high-tech. skills training
Hands-on experience
Work ethics

Quitman County statistics show that overall nearly one-third of the population lived in poverty. Just over 17.0 percent of whites and 40.3 percent of blacks were below the poverty line. These poverty rates were much higher than those for the state, where approximately 20.0 percent of the total population, 11.1 percent of whites and 34.9 percent of blacks lived in poverty. Patterns similar to those just discussed were found at the household level. Total household poverty approached 30.0 percent in Coahoma and Quitman Counties, and there were again differences in the percent of racial group households living in poverty.

To summarize findings from analysis of Census data, Coahoma and Quitman Counties, both located in the Delta, share many similarities. While reflective of the state as a whole on some accounts, they are unique from the state in other respects. It appears particularly important to note that Coahoma and Quitman Counties

have populations that are over two-thirds minority and that they have lower household incomes than the state in general. Also noteworthy are the high unemployment rates, especially among blacks, and the challenges of poverty. These findings are similar to many other analyses of the Mississippi Delta (e.g. Cosby et al. 1992; Kersen 2002). Beyond the positive and negative socioeconomic relationships that these statistics point toward, it is also important to recognize that the findings provide a picture of the workforce in Coahoma and Quitman Counties from which appropriate programs may be developed.

### **Interviews with Employers**

Employer interviews were conducted in order to develop a more nuanced account of the socioeconomic and employment context in the target counties as seen from the standpoint of this stakeholder group. What follows is a summary of qualitative interview findings by general issue area (Table 4). Although there were some differences found between employers on these topics, this is a description of overall results, primarily along lines of agreement.

Employers identified numerous assets potentially important for development in the Delta and the target counties. Employers discussed a variety of business assets that could be utilized in pursuit of greater economic development. Mentioned the most were tourism, especially relating to the region's identification as the home of the musical genre known as the "Blues." A few respondents mentioned the increasing presence of casinos. Some interviewees also addressed the opportunity to expand farm-related industry. Often identified as hopeful was the automotive industry as part of future development opportunities. For example, some employers felt as though manufacturing opportunities were going to increase with spin-offs from the Nissan automotive manufacturing plant located in the central region of the state. This, they hoped, would provide more employment opportunities both directly and indirectly through the service sector.

Concerning the physical attributes of the target counties, employers discussed the improved highways, such as the addition of four-lanes to US Highway 61 and the planned interstate highway route, as assets. They viewed these as prominent features given the long-standing geographic exclusion of many Delta communities.



Also mentioned was the improved electrical infrastructure. Several of the employers pointed out that these communities may be appealing because of the space available for manufacturing endeavors. For instance, there were vacated industrial buildings that could house new businesses.

Expanding upon the topic of government-backed initiatives aimed at development, interviewees highlighted numerous assets. They pointed to an increased commitment by local, state and federal agencies to infrastructure development and bringing in new industry. Furthermore, affiliation with an Empowerment Zone and an Enterprise Community was regarded as crucial, and there was support expressed for the Delta Regional Authority's work in the area.<sup>2</sup>

Among the community assets identified, several of the employers mentioned nonprofit organizations committed to education and training. They also pointed out specific workforce education and training programs, including those offered at the Skill Tech. Center as well as regional university and community college partnerships.

Although these assets were identified as having the potential to contribute to expanded job opportunities, employers did identify numerous barriers standing in the way of such development. For some respondents, a general feeling of despair permeated their answers to most questions. Beyond an overall lack of economic opportunity, challenges included finding enough educated, skilled and experienced workers to fill existing positions, let alone to meet the demands of new employers. Part of the problem, according to the respondents, was the difficulty of retaining people and families in the community, given economic problems. This has been difficult in regard to those people who obtain a college education. With such a short list of employment options and a low quality of life in the region, they tend to relocate to other areas.

Also mentioned numerous times in discussions of barriers and challenges were problems with crime and drugs. Combined with

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<sup>2</sup> The Mississippi Delta currently has both an Empowerment Zone designation and an Enterprise Community project. Modeled after the Appalachian Regional Commission, the Delta Regional Authority (DRA) operates in a 240-county/parish area in an eight-state region. It prioritizes use of funds in the areas of basic public infrastructure in distressed/isolated areas; transportation infrastructure for economic development; business development and entrepreneurship; and job training/employment-related education.

what they see as a problematic work ethic, some of the employers felt as though there is a negative atmosphere present in the existing and "potential" workforce.

Asked what they felt should be done in the way of education, training and other types of program interventions to facilitate workforce development, employers focused their attention on three primary areas of action. First, they saw a need for basic skills education in the areas of reading, writing and math. Secondly, they pointed to a desire to see more attention directed toward teaching vocational trades in traditional areas (e.g. building trades, welding, mechanics) and those that are technologically sophisticated, especially computers. Third, many of the employer interviewees felt that attention is needed on increasing motivation.

### **Focus Groups with the Underemployed**

Findings from analysis of the focus groups demonstrate many similarities with those from the employer interviews. This was prevalent on issues regarding the general state of the local/regional economy and what the future may hold. However, there were some issues where the employers and underemployed in these communities seemed to be "talking past" each other.

Focus group participants identified a variety of employment positions they would consider ideal. Opposed to their current status of being either unemployed, working in part-time positions or facing the challenges of traveling to work in the casinos, they mentioned interest in office jobs (e.g. small business management, secretarial), sales, factory production and security, among others. Asked by the focus group facilitator about the features of their ideal job, participants discussed "good pay" (i.e. above minimum wage), decent working conditions and benefits encompassing health insurance, sick leave and vacation time. Additionally, focus group participants directed attention to the need for jobs in their local communities, and they clearly recognized the importance of job security. They complained of losing numerous factory jobs over the past decade as companies moved on in search of cheaper labor.

Considering their ideal employment positions as goals for the future, focus group participants were next asked to identify what assets they had to pursue these ends. It is important to note that they appeared to face difficulty in addressing the issue of what positive

**Table 5. Summary Results from Focus Groups with the Underemployed in Bolivar, Coahoma, Quitman and Tallahatchie Counties, Mississippi.**

<i>Community and Regional Assets</i>
Strong willingness/desire to work
Heightened education levels among the workforce
Extensive skills and experience
Existing workforce training programs
Social service organizations
Available buildings for production/service businesses
<i>Barriers and Challenges</i>
Overall social and economic structure
High level of competition for few jobs
Limited educational credentials
Businesses showing favoritism in hiring practices
Lack of dependable transportation to jobs in other areas
Lack of childcare
<i>Action Ideas</i>
Move beyond traditional/established approaches
Advocate, search for and help develop "good jobs"
Increase educational and training opportunities
Mentorship/apprenticeship program
Small business incubator

attributes their communities had to offer. Still, the focus group process did result in the identification of several assets (Table 5).

Focus group participants discussed the broad set of attributes of people in their respective communities, including a willingness and strong desire to work. In terms of education, they pointed out that a majority of the adults in the area had at least a high school education. This level of educational attainment had not always been the case, and it was therefore seen as a vast improvement. Many people noted that they and others in the area were attempting to increase their education even further, if not through a four-year college then through the nearby community college and the associated Skill Tech. Center. They also mentioned their specific skills and

experiences. Among those discussed were welding, auto mechanics and quality control. Some participants identified past clerical work as having prepared them for office positions.

Concerning community organizational assets, focus group participants felt that the community college was particularly important. Of special interest were the Skill Tech. Center and computer classes. Participants in Quitman and Tallahatchie Counties agreed that these were important assets, but they faced transportation barriers in accessing many of the programs. The Department of Human Services was identified as an important resource by participants in all locations, as was Job Services. However, the focus groups did discuss the problem that while Job Services is an important resource, it has a limited impact because so many people apply for so few jobs. Participants also identified community-based organizations as important assets.

Focus group participants mentioned few physical assets in their communities. There was one notable discussion that did take place; those from Quitman County identified a valuable physical asset – vacant industrial buildings. Because this area has hosted numerous manufacturing endeavors over the years, a few abandoned sites could host such activities in the future. Beyond the real potential of using these sites for some level of redevelopment, this discussion signified an attempt by community residents to define a negative issue, abandoned industrial buildings from factory closures, as a positive asset.

Participants expressed a strong desire for more ideal employment situations and access to crucial assets, but they felt as though they still face numerous barriers and challenges. Discussions revolved around two general issues: 1) barriers facing local and regional development and 2) barriers specific to individuals attempting to achieve ideal employment.

Participants identified a general level of economic struggle in their communities, as well as in the Delta more widely, resulting from social and economic structures and restricted employment options. They pointed to the difficult economic times being faced by rural areas, including the challenges presented to local businesses and farmers. Additionally, they discussed the loss of manufacturing jobs, a condition they attributed to companies searching for the cheapest labor possible combined with trade initiatives resulting in businesses locating across the border and overseas. These problems,

according to focus group participants, lead many people to leave the community, including those who had formerly been in moderate and higher income brackets.

In line with these barriers, some of the focus group participants felt as though traditional development endeavors were simply not working. They argued that local “people of power” resist structural change, and the economic development programs that they had in place were too often based on businesses receiving tax breaks and other incentives where the companies then leave after a few years. Participants were also critical of businesses that wanted local governments to provide more incentives at the same time that the local tax base was draining.

Discussing barriers specific to their attempts aimed at achieving ideal employment, focus group participants went beyond the basic problem of few jobs existing in the area. They pointed out that with unemployment being so high, there was always harsh competition for jobs. Although the participants identified themselves as possessing important skills, they did acknowledge that they had limited formal education credentials. In situations where they had tried to increase their education, participants said that employers still would not hire them because of a lack of experience specifically tied to their newly acquired education. Some of the people felt as though many businesses showed favoritism in hiring, thereby limiting their options even further.

Focus group participants also maintained that the jobs that were most plentiful tended to be either temporary in nature or outside of the community at casinos. Taking on a casino job forced a person to either relocate or spend a great deal of time traveling to and from work. In any event, working outside of the area presented other problems as well, including an increased need for reliable, roadworthy transportation and extended childcare.

Linking the broader social and economic challenges facing these Delta communities with problems specifically located in the labor market discussed thus far, one woman said the following, reading from a statement she had typed in computer class:

It is easy to assume that most people don't have a job because they are lazy and want to collect welfare. This is very untrue for me. For the entire two years I lived in Memphis, Tennessee, I stayed

employed. . . Since I have been here, there are no jobs. McDonald's, Wal-Mart and Popeye's only want to give me 15-20 hours a week. This can't pay the bills for me and my two sons. And I also have a son that attends [community college]. Since there are no jobs here, I put in several applications at the casinos. If I find a job, it would be wonderful, but it is so hard to get back and forth to the casino. If you don't have your own transportation it's hard. . .

When asked about the potential of developing more small businesses in the area, several of the focus group participants expressed interest in the idea and indicated that they had given it thought. This was especially the case with the Coahoma County group where specific business ideas were discussed. All of the focus groups identified a barrier in not knowing how to develop and implement business plans, and they also pointed to a need for assistance with working their way through the credit system. The Quitman County focus group participants were concerned about the ability of their community to support more small businesses. One alternative discussed there was developing some form of cooperative industry that would entail locally dispersed ownership and provide jobs through the manufacturing of consumer goods.

Considering their ideal employment situations, the assets they have at their disposal and the barriers that stand in their way, focus group participants were asked to discuss what they feel should be done to strengthen their position. People had a variety of things to say in this regard, directing attention to what different agencies and organizations should do and what activities they could engage in themselves. To begin, focus group participants brought attention to the need to go beyond traditional, established development channels and instead pursue employment security and new job creation from a variety of angles. In all four groups, there was a mixed sense of self and collective efficacy among some and low self-esteem and little sense of hope for the community by others.

Asked what community-based organizations and their partners could do in conjunction with residents to improve their employment situations, participants developed numerous suggestions that they felt had potential for changing the world in which they live. These included arguments that the organizations should motivate and/or

challenge traditional approaches to development. Underemployed participants also maintained that organizations should serve as “advocates” for working and unemployed people when attempts are made to bring businesses into the communities. This would include pushing for employers that pay more than minimum wage, provide benefits, make moderate to long-term commitments and provide training for locals to assume labor and management positions. They called for a mentoring and/or apprenticeship program to assist people in obtaining education, skills and experience simultaneously. Assistance was also requested in the realm of small business training, planning and development.

### **Discussion of Research and Points for Consideration**

Livelihood security has numerous dimensions, including employment status. Underemployment, consisting of multiple levels ranging from unemployment to low-wage positions, presents a risk to livelihood security. Previous quantitative research suggests that rural residents face high risk in this realm, especially among racial and cultural minority groups (Beaulieu and Barfield 2000; Jensen et al. 1999; Jensen, Findeis and Wang 2000; Saenz and Thomas 1991; Slack and Jensen 2000). Considered in conjunction with qualitative research results (e.g. Duncan 1999), these findings warrant research attention and the development and implementation of interventions, or put more pointedly, action programs. Utilizing the community-based action research (CBAR) framework, this study was conducted under the auspices of asset mapping and needs assessment using three methods of research: analysis of Census data, qualitative telephone interviews with employers and focus groups with the underemployed. Follow-up meetings were used to check, expand and interpret research results, and additional planning meetings were held. This resulted in a pilot program for coordination of workforce development services and professional training.

Findings from analysis of Census data suggest that Coahoma and Quitman Counties share similarities with the state of Mississippi as a whole, although there are important distinguishing characteristics reflective of the Delta region. These include a dominant minority population, high unemployment rates, low incomes and an alarming number of people living below the poverty line. While these features of the Delta have been mentioned numerous

times before in research and policy discussions, it is seldom that movement is made beyond such a negative picture to assess the “places” and “spaces” where positive change is occurring and may be effectively pursued in the future.

The CBAR framework asks that researchers move beyond generalized descriptions of a situation to address what can be done in pursuit of social change aimed at increasing livelihood security and quality of life. In so doing, employers and underemployed people in the target counties were asked to participate by providing their accounts of the situation, identify what assets exist to improve their lot and discuss what barriers must be overcome in the process. In comparing their stories or accounts of “everyday life,” many similarities and differences were brought to light. It is on both of these fronts that action must be pursued. Areas of common ground between employers and current and potential workers should be targeted and capitalized upon in order for local businesses, and thus jobs, to be retained and expanded.

Discussions with employers and underemployed residents highlight the position that the fate of their communities rests with the success of all stakeholders. At the same time, there are instances where the two groups are talking past one another. For example, employers argued that they face difficulty in finding people with education, skills and experience, and they maintained that it is often trying to find employees who even want these things or have the motivation to work. On the other hand, underemployed residents argued that there is little attention given to their strong willingness to work and the wide variety of skills and experiences that they do possess. In pursuit of social and economic change, it will be necessary for these different points of view to be directly addressed.

There is also concern among the underemployed in regard to what types of businesses are developed in the area. While focus group participants all agreed that it will be necessary for additional companies to locate in the area and thus augment employment opportunities, they appear to recognize that those businesses searching for low-wage workers and that are unwilling to make commitments to the communities probably do not hold the keys to a secure future. Instead, they expressed interest in jobs that will provide an increased standard of living through higher wages, benefits and decent working conditions. It is on this foundation that they might be able



to achieve their ideal employment situation and thereby attain greater livelihood security.

In considering the research findings presented here, it is necessary to highlight an important caveat in the project design and results. The reader should note that the design of this research project was intended to provide depth to the knowledge concerning underemployment obtained through more general studies and to empirically inform action. Although this approach allowed for the collection and analysis of important and potentially generalizable data, it would be inappropriate to interpret results as applying beyond the circle of project participants (with the exception of Census data). Employer interviews and underemployed focus groups were conducted with those people willing to participate in an effort defined as expanding beyond more than simple research. This limits generalizability to the larger population of employers and community residents.

Taking this into account, it is still safe to argue that reliable and valid results were provided to inform the partners' planning process, and it is crucial to note that the participants in this research effort will most likely be the first in the area to assist in such an endeavor. As a case study, this research may serve not only the specific individuals and organizations involved in the project but also the broader community development, research and policymaking arenas. Future comparison among such studies will help to build knowledge regarding assets, needs and strategies for action. This has the potential to help fill gaps in the rural South in general and the Delta region in particular.

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